
Witches, Bitches & Fluids: Girl Bands Performing Ugliness as Resistance

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Witches, Bitches & Fluids

Girl Bands Performing Ugliness as Resistance

Karina Eileraas

The future of rock belongs to women.

—Kurt Cobain, 1994
(in Raphael 1995:vi)

*I'm not safe. I'm giving something hard, and I have to do some damage,
'cause that's what I'm here for. And if I don't, there's no point. No
point in living.*

—Courtney Love of Hole, 1994
(in Raphael 1995:14–15)

And like any artist with no form, she became dangerous.

—Toni Morrison (Sula, 1974)

*i. ugliness as a strategy of resistance among girl bands
There's no power like my ugly.*

—Hole (“Pretty On the Inside,” 1991)

Girl, you sho' is ugly!

—Alice Walker (The Color Purple, 1983)

First, what do I mean by ugliness? I view it as an intentional deviation from “nice, gentle, pretty” ways of looking, talking, behaving, and visualizing. Contemporary girl bands deploy “ugliness” as a resistant practice that challenges cultural representations of “pretty” femininity. Specifically, I consider the following as sites of “ugliness” in girl-band performance: album cover art, image, voice, sound, language, lyrics, stage antics, sexuality, and the body.

Ugliness as a resistant strategy in rock is not a novelty. Its most noteworthy (past) moment came in the 1970s with punk rock. The punk aesthetic, em-



bodied by Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols, consisted of self-defilement, or “uglification,” accompanied by an antiestablishment attitude. Reductively speaking, punk enlisted cursing, safety-pin fashion, and the animal-like snarl. Punk imagined the body as a quasi-Hobbesian state, ruled by uncontrollable urges for sex and violence; punk imagery employed the body’s uncontrollability as a means of waging a symbolic war against the status quo, beginning with the monarchy in England. Yet, as Suleiman argues, the punk imaginary reinforced rather than challenged sexist stereotypes and employed misogynistic attitudes despite its putative goal to “subvert” social norms (1990:28–33).

* * *

Burn the witch, the witch is dead/ Just bring me back her head.

—Hole (“Softer, Softest,” 1994)

*God sometimes you just don’t come through
[...] a few witches burning/ gets a little toasty here.*

—Tori Amos (“God,” 1994)

Many girl bands refer to witches, bitches, or whores—ugly, unruly, and persecuted female identities throughout history—in their lyrics and album artwork. Tori Amos refers to witches in her song “God” (1994) among others. The words and vocal techniques of Lydia Lunch explore the hysteric as a feminist performance artist in a way that turns the tables on Charcot. The women of Huggy Bear perform onstage with words like SLUT and BITCH visibly scrawled on their bodies. Hole deploys witch icons on its album cover art, as well as witch, slut, and bitch references in songs such as “Violet” (1994) and “Teenage Whore” (1991). Hole also refers ad nauseum to the props of “conventional” or pretty femininity in its album and CD art, with photographs and sketches of perfume bottles, bras, diamond rings, lipstick, high-heeled shoes, garters, ballerina figurines, Barbie dolls, purses, wedding dresses, and tiaras.

1. & 2. “Girl bands constantly couple symbols of conventional female ‘prettiness’ with violent and destructive images.” Right: Hole’s Doll Parts CD cover shows a Barbie bridal gown, veil, shoes, jewelry, and corsage. (Photo by John Skalicky, courtesy of Brian Celler) Left: Courtney Love, lead singer of Hole, onstage—with arm graffiti: Witch/Slut. (Photo by LFI, courtesy of Music Sales Corp., UK)

Student Essay Contest Winner

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Women's Studies at Northwestern University is an interdisciplinary program, offering an undergraduate major and minor and a graduate certificate. It provides students with the opportunity to study women's issues, feminist theory, and larger questions interrelating gender, sexuality, race, and class from interdisciplinary perspectives. The program also sponsors guest speakers, a quarterly graduate/faculty colloquium, and other workshops and lectures on campus.

The PhD Program in French at Northwestern offers a theoretically sophisticated study of French and Francophone literatures and cultures. Students are exposed to a wide variety of theoretical approaches and, through courses that cross disciplinary boundaries, are encouraged to situate literature in a broad cultural context. Courses in the department cover all major genres and periods. A three-year sequence gives students a solid ground in literature from the 18th century on, with special attention to the multiplicity of traditions that constitute French and Francophone cultures. Students TA from their second year on, and they are given the opportunity to spend their fourth year (or part of it) in France. The department invites distinguished scholars from France and the U.S. for conferences and colloquia; most recently, guests have included Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida.

Their reference to "essential" female prettiness is everywhere subverted by co-existing ugly imagery such as running mascara and dismembered dolls.

Girl bands' attention to stereotypically ugly women highlights the problematic status of rebellious, unconventional, and desiring women throughout Western history. To provocatively invoke the ugly or despised figures of the witch, bitch, and whore is an act of genealogy (foraging through the history of women's representation), resignification, and potential self-empowerment. Girl bands' appropriation of negative female iconography stages an explosive assault on, and an ironic reversal of, images foundational to misogynist symbolism. Yet it is also significant that girl bands constantly couple symbols of conventional female "prettiness" with violent and destructive images. Their surrealist juxtapositions create a visual economy that emphasizes the violence to and alienation from the body that obedient performances of "pretty" femininity entail.

* * *

*I said, "you don't need my voice, girl/ you have your own—
but you never thought it was enough."*

—Tori Amos ("Bells for Her," 1994)

You should learn how to say NO!

—Hole ("Violet," 1994)

Voice, as a physical phenomenon channeled by the lungs in fits of concerted breathing, means nothing without the body. At the same time,

“voice,” especially as a critical issue for female subjectivity and agency in feminist studies, is also a symbol of political representation. “Voice,” then, is a concept crucial to *identity*—which is, after all, primarily a site of both inscription and of “telling.”

Girl bands often use the ugly voice as a tool for cathartic expression; a means to articulate the “self” while acknowledging it as a site of fiction, contest, incoherence, social inscription, and performativity. Girl bands use their voices as weapons. Ugly voice delivers an in-your-face body; girl grunge bands “[get] up on stage and [create] a defiant noise that [says]: fuck anyone who doesn’t like it. Direct sexual confrontation becomes the norm” (Raphael 1995:xxv). Most girl bands scream and hiss in their music, including L7, Hole, Babes In Toyland, 7 Year Bitch, Lunachicks, and Siouxsie Sioux, who titled one of her earliest albums *The Scream* (1978). Kat Bjelland, lead singer of Babes In Toyland, explains that, for her, screaming is a cathartic release from childhood, when she was always told by her parents to shut up and was frequently locked in her room. To her, screaming represents a way to overcome the feelings of devaluation and worthlessness that childhood silence provoked. She says of her band, “Our music is like Pepto-Bismol: really pink and nice, except it tastes like shit! But it makes you feel better” (Press and Reynolds 1995:264). Diamanda Galas also uses such vocal techniques as “ugly” shrieks and wails. And as Bikini Kill drummer Tobi Vail claims, “For girls to pick up guitars and scream their heads off in a totally oppressive, fucked-up male-dominated culture is to seize power. [...]his [is] a political act” (in O’Brien 1995:158).

The persistent scream/howl/wail/moan/shriek of girl-band music signals an aggressive, antidecorum presence. This is politically significant in a culture that has historically socialized women to doubt the authority of their voices and to soften or silence them altogether; a culture which has at least partially contributed to women’s experiences of voicelessness in violent situations such as domestic abuse and rape.¹ Women’s self-defense classes typically devote class time to the practice of *screaming*. For many women, screaming is an acquired skill—and given that the first sound we all make as babies is the cry or scream, the fact that grown women must rediscover and cultivate this scream attests to the mammoth task of *unlearning* that accompanies any movement from female or feminine to feminist. In this context, the girl-band scream can be read as a cry that proclaims substantial feminist presence: as Hole screams in “Gutless,” “Come on, try to shut me up!” (1994).

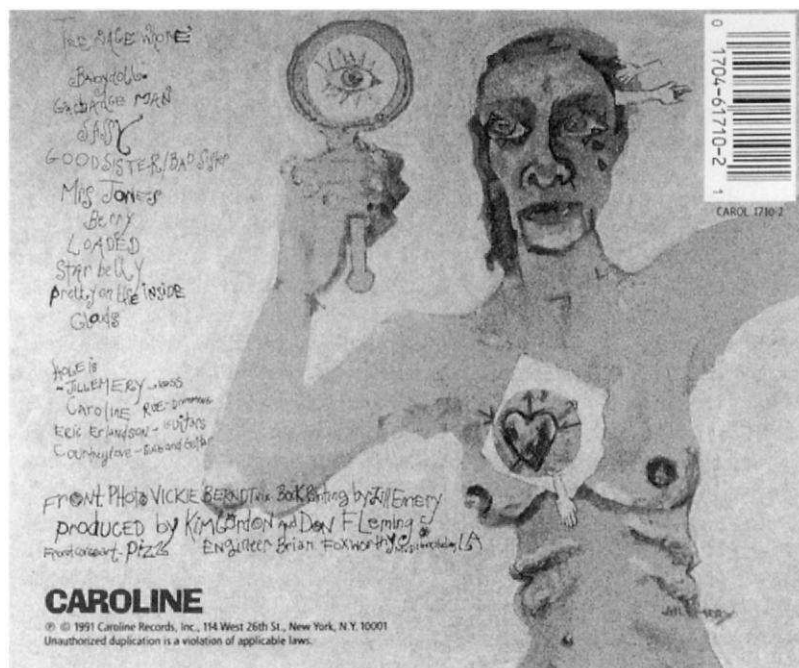
But the “ugly” voice also constitutes a form of revolt against the grammar and syntax of phallogocentrism and, arguably, a step toward a specifically “female” language, as Hélène Cixous has theorized in her notion of *l’écriture féminine* (1981). The ugly sounds and incoherent babble of girl rock disrupt “language” as we know it. They operate on the poststructuralist premise that language speaks *through us*, through our bodies, history, and culture—we do not just speak it or, least of all, own it. As such, girl bands’ voices represent “selves” that are not always intentional, knowable, or visible to themselves; selves that dispel the fantasy of the coherent subject as “its own point of departure” (Butler 1992:9). Girl bands’ rebellion against diction privileges nonsense as sexed excess, as a margin from which to contaminate the patriarchal symbolic center. Musically, it parallels “Jabberwocky,” a language of illogic, or inverted/subverted/imploded “logic.” The Cocteau Twins’s and Throwing Muses’s garbled, fluid lyrics suggest openness, irresolution, and the impossibility of knowing. Siouxsie Sioux and Sinéad O’Connor enlist earth-shaking moans and wails in their music. Patti Smith’s album *Babelogue* (1976) teems with the language of incoherency, babbling, and primal utterance and can be seen as an ugly rebellion against the structures of patriarchal language. In the Sugarcubes’s hit song “Birthday” (1988), Bjork releases an orgasmic, “mon-

strous starburst gush of agony/ecstasy, a mix of [...] birth-pang, hiccup and mystic wonder that seems to explode in the listener's head. [...]er voice devours everything around her, it's as big as the sky" (Press and Reynolds 1995:379). Yoko Ono's music of 1970/71 shrieks and hisses in an expression of female anger and rage, in a language prior to polished articulation. All of these works contain an excess of meaning and intensity that cannot be contained by decipherable words. The artists approach vocal terrorism; their noise, sound debris, and frequent laughter *damage* language. Girl bands act as strangers in their own language, appropriating its internal polylingualism² and tracing personal lines of escape from its hegemonic order. Speaking in tongues, these women realize perhaps that "the loss of the sense of the 'normal' [...] can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when the 'normal,' the 'original,' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody" (Butler 1990:139).

Indeed, girl bands' strategic use of ugly voices seems to "break up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous 1981:258) and to remind us that language is always pregnant with impurity.

Ugly vocal techniques employed by girl bands demonstrate that even working *within* the dominant discourse of rock allows for certain tactics of subversion. Language, as the laboratory of signification, is an obligatory playground. Girl bands' tactics not only disrupt "proper" syntax, much like the poetry of e.e. cummings, but also "materialize" language: they create a voice that, through the engagement of screams and laughter, virtually "speaks" the body and its improprieties. Their vocal effects are potentially ruinous. In Donna Haraway's terms, girl-band voices represent "not the dream of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (1989:204). "Ugly" voice breaks the "rules" of rock to bruise and rework the social meanings of its discourse.

3. Hole's *Pretty on the Inside* CD back cover features a painting by the band's former bassist: a contorted, anorexic, bruised and bleeding woman is crying and holding a hand-mirror. (Painting by Jill Emery; courtesy of Brian Celler)



*pretty pink bedroom scuffs knocked against the plumbing below the sink
as he held her up and the only sound was Niagara Falls. Later she
dreamed of the apocalypse on a pale satin pillow with lace edging.*

—Hole (Doll Parts liner notes, 1994)

As Suzanne Vega articulates in her song “Bad Wisdom” (1992), sexual abuse leaves the body with “strange information,” often trapping this body—especially when young—between innocence and adulthood. Girl-band music exposes violation in visceral, un-speak-able ways that recall Nietzsche’s notion of writing with one’s own blood (1968), Frida Kahlo’s self-portraiture, and Sylvia Plath’s poetry. Diamanda Galas claims to have trained herself to use her voice like a gun—presumably as protection against, and response to, violation (O’Brien 1995:156). Tori Amos’s song “Me and a Gun” (1991), as well as her commitment to the rape-crisis hotline known as RAINN, celebrate the power of the voice to express and re-own the female body after an experience of rape. Self-expression and disclosure of abuse are critical tasks for feminist tongues.

* * *

Stuck deep inside, an old shrapnel wound [...] just use it.

—Courtney Love (in *Raphael* 1995:30)

*I watched a lot of (adolescent) girls my age get distracted—boys would
become their mirrors, whereas our guitars were our mirrors. [...] The fact
that we felt ugly was a real blessing! I don’t think you ever lose that feel-
ing of ugliness once you’ve had it.*

—Tanya Donelly, of Belly
(in *Evans* 1994:101)

Many girl bands perform ugliness as a way of showcasing the self-hatred that cultural constructions of femininity produce and/or amplify. Women’s self-loathing often stems from a perceived inability to measure up to social standards of the “ideal” and frequently engenders distorted self-images that lead to such problems as eating disorders. Hole’s *Pretty on the Inside* album cover, a painting by former bassist Jill Emery, features a contorted, anorexic, bruised and bleeding woman who is crying and holding a hand-mirror; in her head and heart are extraneous, miniature arms, possibly symbolic of conflicting voices within her heart and mind. Her mirror reflects only an eye, perhaps representative of the beholder’s confused image of herself or of the omnipresent, internalized “eye” of the male gaze as a sort of policeman of “pretty” femininity. The album’s artwork also includes images of hysteric female patients, leather girls, madwomen, pregnant stomachs, Raggedy Ann with her head coming apart, a young girl covering her face. *Pretty on the Inside*, the album’s title, is a phrase commonly offered as “reassurance” to girls who lack the physical traits society has deemed “attractive.” Press and Reynolds contend that “Hole aims to bring out the full meaning of the notion that beauty is only skin-deep by exposing the unpretty truth of the body’s interior” (1995:263). I would argue instead that Hole depicts the *gaping abyss* between female “beauty” seen and felt, ideal and real. But Hole’s artwork not only represents the abyss or the antipodes of femininity; it also *contests* the reduction that dichotomous constructions of female sexuality entail.

* * *

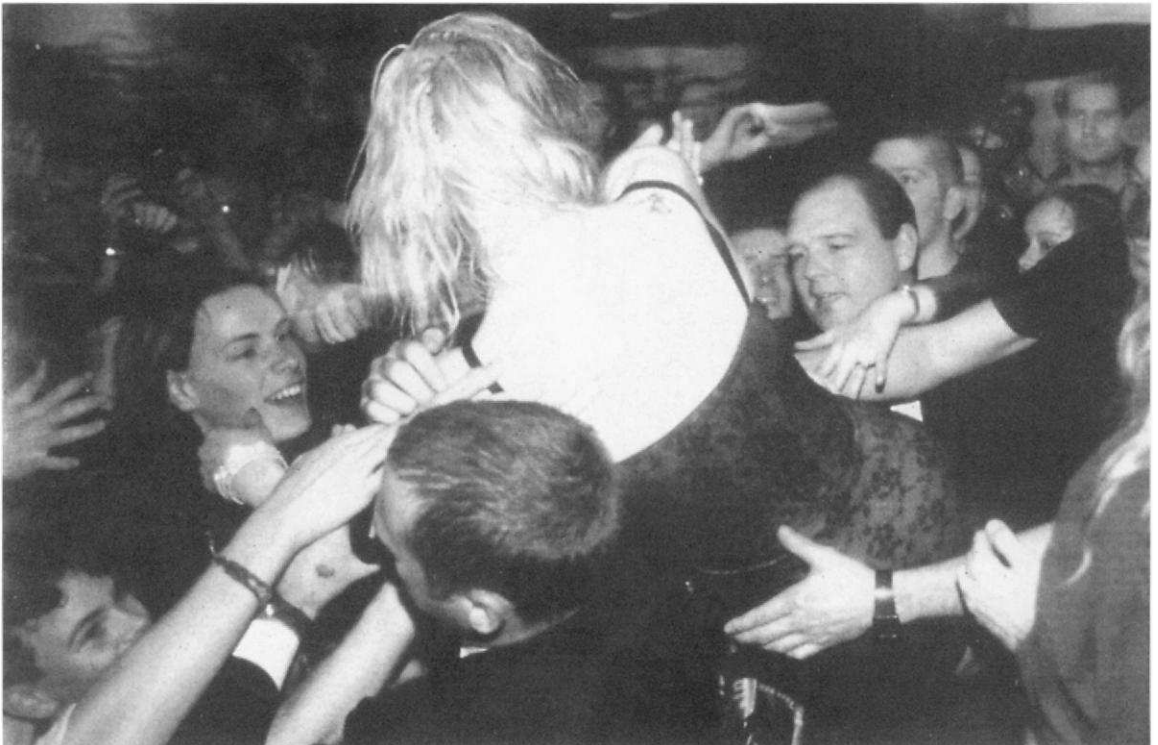
Every time that I sell myself to you, I feel a little bit cheaper than I need to.
—Hole (“Asking for It,” 1994)

*They get what they want and they never want it again [...]
Go on, take everything, take everything, I want you to.*
—Hole (“Violet,” 1994)

Hole couples the strategic evocation of “ugly” female self-image with incitements to corporeal violence. Courtney Love describes her style of dress as “Kinderwhore”; as one feminist music critic explains, “it’s child-woman, fucked-up Lolita, innocence disturbed. It is a potent, on-the-edge image which toys with vulnerability and power [and] hints, disturbingly, at a ‘rape victim’ look” (Raphael 1995:xxvi). In “Violet,” as quoted above, Hole welcomes a presumably male subject to “take everything” of a woman’s body and sex. Especially in this song, Hole’s lyrics invite violation and bodily entry. Yet, this invitation can be experienced as “liberating” only for the abused and the masochistic.

Rape survivors in some cases become, for a certain period of time after their assault, “masochists” par excellence. Experiencing rape-trauma syndrome, a survivor who has lost control of her body may no longer feel a need to enforce her body’s boundaries and may desire further violation and even prostitution to “affirm” her body’s worthlessness.³ Desires for violation are, in this case, symptoms of self-loathing: they betray a desire to engrave abjection onto the body and to punish or obliterate the body for the “trouble” it brings its owner. Interestingly, Courtney Love wrote “Asking for It” after a London concert during which she was fondled, undressed, and (in her words) “figuratively raped” by several of her front-row audience members. She conceived “Asking

4. Courtney Love frequently dives off the stage during concerts and is sometimes “fondled, undressed, and (in her words) ‘figuratively raped’ by her front-row audience members.” (Photo by Chris Taylor, in Wise 1995)



for It” as a tongue-in-cheek response to the perpetrators. Hole’s lyrics, then, can be read as ambivalent traces of—and playful challenges to—women’s sexual degradation.

* * *

I never wanted to fit into someone else’s idea of what I should be, as a girl.

—Lesley Rankine, of Silverfish
(in Evans 1994:262)

*She lost all her innocence, gave it to an abscess
She lost all her innocence, she says I am not a feminist
It’s...not...yours...fuck you!!!*

—Hole (“I Think That I Would Die,” 1994)

Girl bands habitually engage in “ugly” stage behavior. Courtney Love, writhing in torn slips and stockings, often dives off her broken doll-littered stages into the audience, smashes her guitar, and fights with audience members. At Lollapalooza’s closing in California in August 1995, a security guard carried Love away from her own performance after she jumped offstage twice to attack fans. During the performance in London mentioned above, Love led chants of “I’m a bitch,” before she dove off the stage and was mauled, probed, and undressed by what she deemed “a bunch of football guys” hostile to her in-your-face sexuality. She later wrote about her experience as a figurative rape, questioning why women cannot have the same contact with their audiences as male performers—why women’s aggression incites violation while male performers receive *respect*.

“Ugly,” aggressive behavior by women is variously expressed and received. Kat Bjelland, lead singer for Babes In Toyland, stamps her feet onstage, performs the “knifeslide” by bending and bashing her guitar against her bruised hips and stomach, and whirls her head feverishly. Her performance suggests raw, uncontainable energy and sexuality. During a live television performance, a member of L7 exposed her crotch; later, in an infamous performance at the 1992 Reading Festival in England, L7 singer/guitarist Donita Sparks pulled the tampon out of her vagina and hurled it into the audience. However outrageous, both actions can be read as feminist for their brash evocation of the “improper,” “unclean,” below-the-belt femininity that the band’s name, L7, evokes—L/7, a women’s underwear size.

Girl bands’ ugly antics flaunt traditionally hidden or unspeakable aspects of the female body and flagrantly defy conventional modes of “femininity” and domesticity. Siouxsie Sioux’s song entitled “Suburban Relapse” tells the story of a housewife who snaps one day while doing the dishes. She throws consumer goods at her neighbors and exposes herself in public (1978). The agony of the routines and expectations of conventional femininity incites her foray into “ugliness”—an investigation which constitutes a rebellion against prescribed roles for women in the home, the mire of stifling, suburban domesticity, and the lack of outlets for women’s creative expression. As Courtney Love, herself a widow and mother, snarls in “Plump”: “I don’t do the dishes, I throw them in the crib!” (1994).

* * *

*The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which gapes open
[...] female sexuality is a hole.*

—Jean-Paul Sartre (Being and Nothingness, 1956)

Hole reputedly took its name from a line in Euripides' *Medea* in which "the protagonist talks of a piercing hole in her soul—"it's about the abyss that's inside,"" explains Love (in O'Brien 1995:162). Strikingly, the band's name also symbolizes the *hole* in discourse that presents female sexuality as a void, receptacle, and wound—or, that which is never *whole*. Luce Irigaray insists on the need to *create* where history has left gaping holes. She discusses a Freud who "ran out of breath," who significantly read the symptoms of his time and culture, yet who failed to fill in the empty spaces and specifically to explore the "dark continent" of female sexuality (Irigaray 1985: 205–18). Underlying Irigaray's argument is the insistence that dominant discursive regimes, such as psychoanalysis, *constitute* female sexuality as a void. Cultural/medical constructions of female sexuality as a "hole" have historically worked to erase from the discourse of *sex* any female "excesses," like the clitoris and women's potential for multiple, successive orgasms. Irigaray argues that female desire is lost in and repressed by the specular economy, such that any articulation of female sexuality involves a remembering of its "forgotten" (i.e., culturally repressed) elements, such as female body fluids (1985: 106–18). Since girl bands present "ugly" or confrontational sexualities onstage and in their lyrics, they resist the gaps and erasures of masculinist culture.

* * *

Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language [...] if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure.

—Luce Irigaray (1985:156–57)

I want to be the girl with the most cake.

—Hole ("Doll Parts," 1994)

Women musicians position themselves as sexual *subjects* rather than objects of desire and pleasure. Kat Bjelland of Babes In Toyland once belonged to a group called the Venarays, a play on the word venary, or "actively seeking sex"—a name that aligned her with sexual activity and pleasure rather than with "traditional" femininity's coordinates of passivity and vulnerability. Tori Amos plays her piano in erotically charged ways, seductively spinning and writhing on the bench beneath her legs, or sitting with her legs spread open, facing the audience. Regarding her overt sexuality in performance, Amos says, "Now I realize I do have a choice with my sexual role, and sexuality has so much more to do with things other than penises and vaginas" (in Evans 1994:13). Her lyrics frequently invoke self-pleasure and masturbation, as in "Icicle": "I think the Good Book is missing some pages/ gonna lay me down/ and when my hand touches myself I can finally rest my head/ and when they say 'take of his body'/ I think I'll take from mine instead/ Getting off..." (1994). This celebration of onanism recalls the Divinyls's hedonist anthem, "I Touch Myself" (1991); both songs configure women with conventionally "unspeakable" appetites for sex, pleasure, and desire.

Hole musicians similarly position themselves as actively sexual. Their "Asking for It" challenges the popular myth, that women "consent" to rape by "sexy dressing": "Was she asking for it?/ Did she ask you twice?" (1994). In "Babydoll" (1991) Hole sings of a girl who "embodies" sex, yet she is not portrayed as "sexy" because her desire is not her own; she is a passive toy, an object of male desire. Tori Amos blatantly disparages masculinist desire and *machismo* in "Precious Things" with a snarling "so you can make me come, that doesn't make you Jesus" (1991). All of these bands play with the failure of the

“virgin/whore” dichotomy that is pervasive in the language of conventional femininity to encompass or express female sexuality. Girl bands affirm sex as part of identity, yet they emphasize the “ugly,” confrontational aspects of its embodiment—such as rape, whoredom, and masturbation—rather than present it, in *Playboy* fashion, as an effect of the inorganic: leather, latex, and lace.

Girl-band wit often relies on grotesque hyperbole of the female body, particularly the vulva (especially lips and the clitoris), and on other forms of irony. L7’s song “Fast and Frightening” (1990) celebrates a female antihero with “so much clit,” she doesn’t need any balls. Another of their songs, “The Bomb” (1994), makes reference to “plastic lips” that tell “plastic lies”—lyrics that convey the strategically multiple meanings of “lips” as theorized by Irigaray in “When Our Lips Speak Together” (1985: 205–18). Girl-band humor is spoofed well by the girl band Camel Lips in John Waters’s film *Serial Mom*, whose band members wear padding and tight pants to accentuate their “lips” for a video camera focused below the waist. I read girl-band vulva humor as an attempt to recast Freudian penis envy into “clitoris envy”—or perhaps to carve out a (big) *space* for the female body within feminist identity politics.

* * *

*I will tear the petals off of you
Rose red I will make you tell the truth.*

—Hole (“Asking for It,” 1994)

*If women could learn to be as unattractive as men, it would go a long
way towards demystifying females in bands.*

—Tanya Donnelly (in Evans 1994:93)

Girl bands demystify conventional “femininity” by magnifying its cultural construction as well as the “ugliness” disallowed by its popular representations. These bands imply that, if indeed the body is “molded by a great many distinct regimes [...] why maintain the absolute truth of those fictions which sustain it?” (Foucault 1984:82, 87). Girl-band lyrics expose the alienation and the “messy” interior of the female body exacted by its violent over-mythification. In doing so, they evoke the mutilation and split subjectivity articulated by Arthur Rimbaud (“je est un autre/ ‘I’ is an other” [1965:202]). Or, as Hole puts it in “Miss World,” “I am the girl you know/ I lie and lie and lie” (1994). Girl bands’ exhibitionist ugliness reveals the state of being an “other” to oneself; the fakeness and “doubleness” within. Strategic ugliness wars against the so-called “beauty myth”—the capitalist, mass-media production of the “desire” among women to be beautiful (see Wolf 1991)—and reworks “pretty” femininity into the grotesque.

* * *

*The pride taken by women in the appearance of their genitals is quite a
special feature of their vanity. [...] An abnormal secretion of the mucous
membrane of the vagina is looked upon as a source of disgust.*

—Sigmund Freud (1963:103)

Slime is [...] sickly-sweet feminine revenge.

—Jean-Paul Sartre (1956)

Many theorists, including Sartre and Freud, have associated femininity with viscous and polluting fluids. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, “In the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless



5. The CD cover for Hole's *Live Through This* shows the conventional American symbol for "prettiness," the prom queen, with mascara oozing from her eyes. (Photo by Ellen von Unwerth; courtesy of Brian Celler)

It smells like girl, it smells like girl.

—Hole ("*She Walks on Me*," 1994)

Gush. Ooze. Things coming out that should be kept in... Yecchhh... I didn't want to know what's inside.

—Lucy Lippard (1976:231)

Girl bands stage a reappearance of bodily fluids in a culture in which "all the body's products, except tears, [are] simply unmentionable" (Greenblatt 1982:16)—a fact especially symptomized by the dizzying array of commercial products available to control or contain various female bodily fluids, especially sweat, menstrual blood, and vaginal discharge.⁴ Attention to fluids is crucial to Irigaray's vision of a feminist economy. Girl bands' focus on fluids re-maps the female body, its traditionally unspeakable desires, and its threats to contaminate.

References to bodily fluids in girl-band lyrics abound. In "*Softer, Softest*," "*She Walks on Me*," "*Plump*," "*Good Sister, Bad Sister*," and "*Mrs. Jones*," Hole refers to spit, vomit, curdled/sour milk, blisters, scar tissue, blood, pus, shit, viruses, and plasma. The Lunachicks revel in female bodily "mess": their song "*Plugg*" (1992) discusses menstrual cramps, while "*Binge & Purge*" (1992) "mocks the 'good girls' who try to conform to cheerleader standards of sterile cleanliness by revealing the true goo concealed beneath the pom-poms (periods, bulimia)" (Press and Reynolds 1995:345). The music is interrupted periodically by the sound of vomiting. References to blood are especially interesting in that blood is pain made visible; it is pain which seeps *beyond* the limits of the individual in order to overcome its otherwise "unshareable" quality, as Elaine Scarry theorizes in *The Body in Pain* (1985). Lydia Lunch often sings—or wails—about bloodletting as catharsis. Her music seems to beg for a visible wound, a marking on the body's surface to correspond to her internal hell. Her "*Queen of Siam*" (1980) album "teems with bodies dissolving into streams of blood and tears" (Press and Reynolds 1995:258). Diamanda Galas describes her performances as bloodletting, or "a ripping of the flesh" (in O'Brien 1995:157). Tori Amos similarly evokes bloodletting as a means for catharsis in "*Precious Things*" ("let them bleed, let them wash away" [1991]).

Along with fluids, girl bands evoke pregnancy as abjection, internal division, infestation, and contamination—in short, as a parasitic doubling of the

flow; a disorder that threatens all order" (1994:194). What is fearful is the fluid's uncontainability. Vomit, saliva, pus, sweat, and blood all threaten the *solidity* of things. Furthermore, in this age of AIDS, fluids' potential to transmit death is all too evident. Seen in this context, girl bands' focus on bodily fluids is "sickly revenge" because it reclaims the "unsightly" corporeality of femininity and deploys the disgust and fear fluids evoke. Bodily fluids are reminders of the body's permeability, and of the constructed self's reliance upon the delineated border between it and the outside world. Girl bands' focus on the abject—the submarine, subterranean, the unseen/unsightly—is a way of pushing past corporeal limits to a space that is neither inside nor out, yet both: a space that is both reflexive and intersubjective.

* * *

female body. Hole explores the pregnant body as bloated, hormonal, milky, and distorted: “Loaded” paints a pregnant woman as bovine, “suckmilk” oozing from her “sweet cream udder” (1991). Likewise, “Plump” describes how “your milk’s in my mouth/ it makes me sick/ [...] They say I’m plump/ But I throw up all the time” (1994). “Mrs. Jones” (1991) tells the tale of an abortion gone awry, full of stink and infection. In Siouxsie Sioux’s “We Hunger” (1980), pregnancy is a vampiric, parasitic relationship in which the incipient child feeds on the mother’s autonomy and identity. All of these references evoke pregnancy as an occasion of contamination and divided female subjectivity, echoing Gayatri Spivak’s equation of pregnancy with “a particularly contaminated exile from [a woman’s] self as subject” (1993:151). Pregnancy as contamination counters the popular myth of pregnancy and motherhood as a uniquely “pure” state of being. Because girl bands contest the notion of the “pure” mother, they indirectly interrogate nationalist and metaphysical constructions of purity and origin more generally.

* * *

Our flesh arrives to us out of history, just like everything else does.

—Angela Carter (1978)

The body is a uniform! The body is armed militia! The body is violent action! The body claims power! The body’s at war! The body declares itself subject! The body signifies! Communicates! Shouts! Protests! Subverts!

—Italo Calvino (in Fraser 1989)

The body is typically what one regards as most private, most one’s own. Yet, as Foucault and de Certeau emphasize, it is critical to remember that our bodies are, to a great extent, texts: histories, engraved with collective desires and fluctuating wills to power. As such, the body is always already imbricated in a “literary machine,” chewing up the “rational actor” of Western political theory and spitting out “only collective assemblages of enunciation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1990:60). Nihilistic as this may sound, it is precisely this understanding of language as collective and constitutive that allows the possibility of creative invention and bodily intervention as performed by girl bands.

* * *

I am doll parts, bad skin, doll heart/ It stands for knife for the rest of my life/ [...] He only likes these things because he likes to see them break.

—Hole (“Doll Parts,” 1994)

We put ourselves into watertight compartments, break ourselves up into parts, cut ourselves in two.

—Luce Irigaray (1985:217)



6. & 7. The back cover of Hole's CD *Live Through This* (top) and the front of *Babes In Toyland's* *Spanking Machine* (bottom) both use images of disassembled dolls, indicating women's alienation from their own bodies. (Top: Photo by Frank Rodriguez, courtesy of Brian Celler; bottom: Cover design by Daniel Corrigan, courtesy of Twin/Tone Records)



Constant themes of girl-band music are ugly dismemberment and split female subjectivity. Siouxsie Sioux's "Christine" is the anthem of schizophrenic female identity—Christine repeatedly "shatters kaleidoscope-style": "now she's in pieces/ disintegrating" (1980). Similarly, "Jigsaw Feeling" (1971) deals with feelings of alienation from the body by evoking severed limbs and fractured or disassembled bodily identity. Women's bodies constantly come apart in girl bands' songs. In "Vomit Heart" (1989), Babes In Toyland entreats someone to "pull my head apart." Hole's lyrics (and videos) for "Doll Parts," "Miss World" ("Watch me break and watch me burn" [1994]), and "Jennifer's Body" ("He found pieces of Jennifer's body" [1994]) parallel the photomontages of Weimar artist Hanna Höch, the paintings of Surrealist Leonora Carrington, and the multimedia works of Barbara Kruger. These images offer female embodiment not as smooth, airbrushed perfection, but as "ugly"—flawed, broken, multidimensional, and rife with "big veins, bad skin" (Hole, "Doll Parts").

One has only to survey popular culture—from the "Locket Surprise Barbie," whose chest is heart-shaped and removable, doubling as a sort of "hope chest" in which to store makeup and a photo of Ken; to America Online's ban of the word "breast" as an inappropriate and vulgar word (repealed after one week, because it had stymied communications between breast cancer support groups, among others)—to realize the female body is constructed in the American cultural imagination as at once a taboo, fetish, obscenity, and collection of "doll parts." Girl bands' performances of their bodies and identities as ugly, internally divided, and even mutilated offer bodily fictions that counter hegemonic ideals of "femininity." Their performances "stage" the body not only as a site of society's wounding inscriptions, but also as a weapon to wage personal, social, and political resistance. Girl bands' presentation of the body in counterconventional ways is both strategic and political; their stagings actively seek ways to rewrite the discursive practices or cultural "scripts" that inscribe female bodies and minds.

In Press and Reynolds's somewhat totalizing assessment, "Courtney Love's performance is a striptease that removes too many layers to be titillating, exposing a subcutaneous realm of female horror that makes men flinch and recoil" (1995:262). Perhaps an apt metaphor for this kind of performance is that of an endless striptease, one that continues *after* all clothes have been removed. This kind of "stripping" goes beyond the "tease" to reveal the scars just *under* the skin's surface. The metaphor of the endless strip uncovers a fine line between "sexy" and "repulsive" undressing: what is sexy is the piecemeal exhibition of glossy, available (yet always only tentative) surface or flesh; repulsive is its emotional, flawed, rough-hewn underpinning. Hole's exposure of physical and psychic imperfection challenges societal expectations of seamless female beauty and uncomplicatedly "sexy" bodies. Their song "Berry" (1991) urges us to "cut it open"—hinting at the clitoris as berry, speculum as spectacle—to display the "invisible" interior of female sexuality.

* * *

*For all these years, I felt like all these different people at a dinner party.
When you've got the virgin and the whore sitting next to each other...
they're bound to judge each other harshly.*

—Tori Amos (in Press and Reynolds 1995:266)

I fake it so real I am beyond fake.

—Hole ("Doll Parts," 1994)

Girl bands call into question the conventional "props" of gender by performing them as a carnival, offering up a fun-house mirror of grotesque reflec-

“Doll Parts”

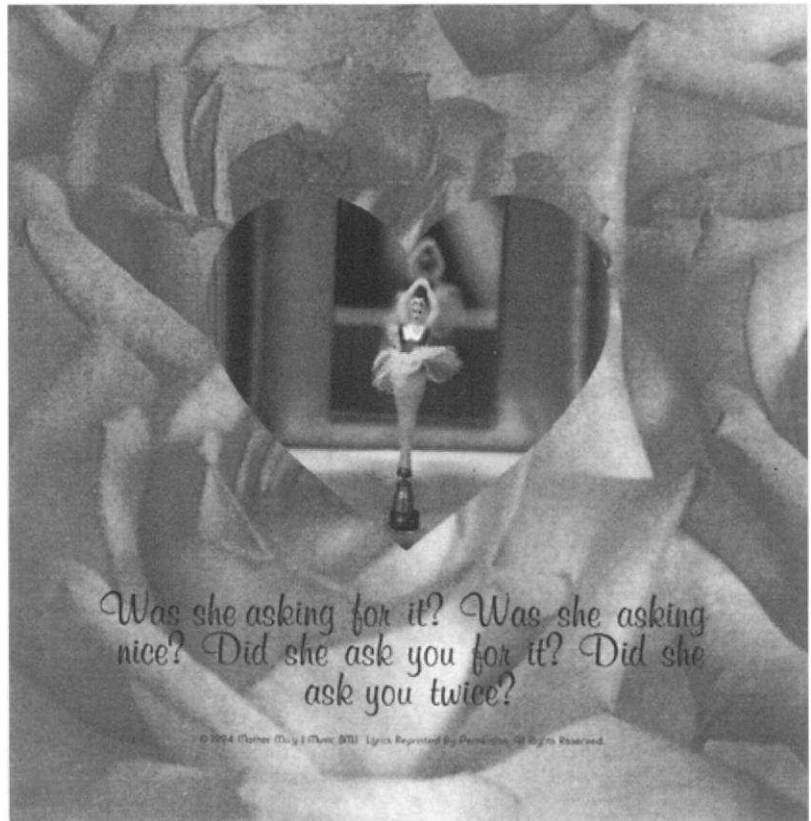
Hole (1994)

- Verse 1:* I am doll eyes/ doll mouth/ doll legs
I am doll arms/ big veins/ dog beg
- Bridge:* Yeah—they really want you, they really want you/
they really do/
Yeah—they really want you, they really want you/
they really do/
- Chorus 1:* I want to be the girl with the most cake/
I want him so much it just turns to hate/
I fake it so real I am beyond fake/
- Coda:* And someday you will ache like I ache/
- Verse 2:* I am doll parts/ bad skin/ doll heart
It stands/ for knife/ for the rest of my life/
- Repeat Bridge*
- Chorus 2:* I want to be the girl with the most cake/
He only loves those things because he loves to see them
break/
I fake it so real I am beyond fake/
- Coda:* And someday you will ache like I ache.

tion and refraction. In this way, girl bands parade, parrot, and parody traditional “femininity.” Kat Bjelland of Babes In Toyland performs in baby-doll dresses and bright lipstick. Courtney Love also performs a “child’s attempt at grown-up seductiveness” (Press and Reynolds 1995:262), with heavy and imperfectly applied eye and lip makeup coupled with tattered baby dresses or slips. Both offer a grotesque parody of female identity and sexuality that is poised between innocence and vulgarity. Love’s torn stockings and clothing suggest passionate sex, sexual assault, or some other form of “wildness” or lost innocence, which, when coupled with songs that “graphically explore adult female sexuality, [is] in part an attempt to rub audiences’ faces in the virgin/whore dichotomy” (262). Girl-band members’ physical appearances may be “pretty” by conventional standards, but they question this “prettiness” through scathing indictments of its enabling props, conditions, and effects, and “uglify” their personas through their multifaceted performances.

Kate Bush, Siouxsie Sioux, and Annie Lennox are protean selves par excellence; they sort through history and mythology, trying on costumes, props, and personae, in order to confront gender boundaries as well as their own points of dissolution. These artists utilize carnivalesque fragments of femininity to create “unstable compounds, sometimes disruptive, sometimes therapeutic” (Press and Reynolds 1995:182) within the conventional discourse of female subjectivity. Their vampy tactics highlight the performative aspects of the supposed “truths” of traditionally “feminine” behavior and enable, in the irreverent spirit of carnival, “ever-changing, playful, undefined forms” (Bakhtin 1984:11). Girl-band artists such as Siouxsie Sioux and Hole travel back through the history of female archetypes, toy with humor and sexuality, and choose elements of identification for their masquerade. Sioux, like the “banana split lady” of her song “Christine,” experiments with the gothic—the adornments and masks of the vampire, witch, dominatrix, and exotic Other—especially in her stage persona and her song “She’s a Carnival” (1982). By so doing, she questions and expands the roles available to women for self-expression.

8. CD artwork from Hole's *Live Through This*. This juxtaposes symbols of "pretty" femininity—a music-box ballerina in a heart, on a bed of roses—with lyrics directed at a rapist: "Was she asking for it?" (Photo courtesy of Brian Celler)



Girl bands' masquerades resemble those of photographer Cindy Sherman, who describes her staged, ironic self-portraiture as "about the fakeness of role-playing as well as contempt for the domineering 'male' audience who would read the images as sexy" (in Suleiman 1991:120). Sherman attempts self-invention through a critical immersion in stereotypes; she drapes herself in the socially coded props of gender. Emphasized by these ironic, feminist performances is the question of interpretation; for, whatever an artist's intention may be, her work must inevitably fall into an interpretive community in which the work's "true" meaning will be produced, questioned, and recast. As Debbie Harry said in a 1993 interview, "'Blondie' was easy [...] a compact theatricality that was easy to understand. I made my own image, then was trapped by it" (in O'Brien 1995:139). Emblematic of this dilemma is Madonna's work; the question as to whether her work subverts or merely reinscribes patriarchal desire still lingers, even after her relative disappearance from the "public eye." Because they investigate archetypes of femininity, girl-band performances of ugliness always risk reinscribing the good girl/bad girl opposition for some audiences.

Conclusion: Ugly Bodies and Border-Dwelling

He said you're really an ugly girl/ and I thanked him.

—Tori Amos ("Precious Things," 1991)

Girl bands' practices of "ugliness" raise several important and unsettling questions. Is mimicry creative or merely repetitive? Can a performance that incorporates sexist stereotypes improve the self-image or political status of women? Can self-empowerment come of an identification with the ugly, the abject?

Cornel West has pointed out that one of the best ways for slaveowners to instill fear in, and thus control, slaves was to convince them of their baseness, ugliness, and bestiality (1993:85). To justify genocide, Hitler employed a similar rhetoric of ugliness to convince his followers of the vileness of, the possibility of contamination by, and the need to exterminate Jews. Given the murderous ends that the discourse of "ugliness" has served, what—and for whom—is its utility as a resistance practice?

* * *

*There is an in-between. I've seen it. [...] I have always loved bastards
and always will.*

—Courtney Love (in Raphael 1995:23)

Fluidity, ambiguity, and hybridity are "threatening" because they represent the possibility of an in-between, of contamination and obfuscation of not only personal but also epistemological boundaries. A salient aspect of intellectual "border-crossing" is the potential to make connections between disparate bodies of knowledge, and to see "otherwise"—to creatively reconceive. I would agree with Julia Kristeva that there is a conspicuous need to "transmute into games what [for some is] an untouchable void" (in Suleiman 1991:125)—like the void of female sexuality—in order to generate subversive, feminist reconceptions of sex and identity. The ugly practices of girl bands represent this form of "anti-voidal" gaming. These artists claim their bodies as their *own* battlegrounds, waging war on the oppressive limits of conventional femininity.

A feminist game of "embodied hybridity" starts by troubling both the dominant discourse and the silence that form a large part of our cultural heritage. This strategy plays one's relation to oneself and one's environment as a destructively creative one, exchanging the architecture of the "given" self for one that enlists the self as both work of art and architect. I strongly agree with Donna Haraway's conviction that "history can have a different shape, articulated through differences that matter. [...] This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (1989:204; see also 1992:98). Contemporary girl bands function like concave mirrors in Irigaray's vision of a feminist economy: to distort, to *burn*, to preclude the possibility of simple reflection. They help us to imagine the creative potentials for self-invention via ugliness, dissonance, and infidelity—at least for the *girls* in Babel.

Notes

1. This culture has been theorized as "rape culture"; for a challenging, postmodern treatment of rape culture and the "rape script," see Sharon Marcus's "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention" (1992).
2. The internal polylingualism of any "major" language has been theorized by many, including Bakhtin (1984) and Deleuze and Guattari (1990).
3. Drawn from several personal and textual sources, including training material for rape victim-advocacy work, Rape Victim Advocates, Chicago.
4. Notably, these are all fluids that can signify *sex*: although one could argue that sweat evokes hard work and activity traditionally associated with "masculinity," the other two fluids clearly represent female sex.

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